

MAKING REMOTE BURIAL VAULT ARRANGEMENTS IS NO LONGER A REMOTE POSSIBILITY: How You Can Make It Effective

BY KEN MOORE



To say the landscape of funeral arrangements has changed is quite the understatement. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused every single funeral home, crematory operator and cemetery to make adjustments for social distancing and servicing families. In addition to the many operating procedures that have been modified, simply communicating with families and helping them make funeral arrangements has been severely impacted. In a world where the human touch is so critical, funeral professionals must find ways to still make that connection. One way is with remote presentations. While remote presentations have certainly been employed by a handful of funeral providers before 2020, current conditions have accelerated the need. Many predict that remote arrangements and presentations will continue to grow in popularity even after the pandemic is over. Regardless, we all have to remember this is still a high-touch business. The difference now is making those touches in a virtual environment – and doing so effectively.

In addition to successful remote engagement with families is the challenge of communicating the value of services and merchandise, especially that which

can be perceived as extraneous if not presented cogently or within some context. In other words, if a family merely is presented with an online list of products without being shown how various options can add more meaning to their loved one's goodbye tribute, then often it becomes a lowest-cost decision.

The choice of an outer burial container (OBC) is especially prone to cost-driven decisions if there is no one, or no method of, articulating the value of a burial vault along with options that can significantly elevate the graveside service experience. A remote presentation should only be physically remote, not emotionally distant. So how can that emotional engagement be attained in a remote environment? The answer lies in straightforward choices and clarity in presentation, using strong visuals and ideally video.

Even in a selection room or arrangements office, families who are presented with too many choices are overwhelmed. Putting an overwhelming amount of choices on a website or in a remote presentation truly is the recipe for confusion, frustration and poor decisions, especially when showing products that are exceedingly unfamiliar to most people. Consider

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the consumer research of Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper, social psychologists who demonstrated how too many options paralyze people's decision-making. They analyzed the choices which 800,000 people made pertaining to retirement funds offered by 647 employers, making this an empirically valid study. When given 59 retirement funds to choose among, 60 percent of employees participated. However, when offered just two fund choices, 75 percent participated. "Since these employees were even given incentives to participate in 401(k)s through employer matches and tax shelters," Iyengar noted, "choosing not to participate essentially throws away free money." Presenting families with limited, yet still distinct, burial vault options – especially remotely – will result in an easier user experience and you may even be surprised to see better choices being made. Take a look at your historical sales of outer burial containers and consider limiting the choices to those which constitute the majority.

Of course, even with a limited selection, merely presenting products without explaining the differences and the value won't be very effective. Why do some consumers buy an expensive car when a cheaper one will do the same functional thing which is transporting them from point A to point B? Because of the value that they see in the more expensive model, value that is likely more emotional value rather than practical value. That same dynamic is involved in an outer burial container selection. While there is definitely a functional difference between an unlined grave box and a lined burial vault, the emotional value in protecting a loved one from underground elements is perhaps even more important. Furthermore, the extreme emotional value that is derived from a vault that is personalized and reflective of the loved one's life is incomparable. A presentation must be done, and the more succinct the better since in a remote environment you don't have the family in front of you to validate that they are understanding what you are saying. Even if you have been a funeral professional for years, consider creating a brief script that ensures you inform the family on the why's, what's and differences among OBCs. Be sure to articulate the value of a graveside service and how a burial vault can play a significant role in commemorating a life

– especially if that graveside service itself may be experienced remotely and the vault is the predominant commemorative component.

A concise presentation still needs strong visuals so be sure that you have visuals that the family can see on-screen while you are making the presentation. Perhaps bullet points for the various burial vaults you are offering can reinforce what you are saying. And strongly consider the use of video for a most effective presentation. A video has a way of engaging people and articulating both functionality and value of burial vaults, including those which can be personalized to transform it from a functional "thing" to a landscape of commemoration. Ask your burial vault provider if they have a video that can be utilized in remote presentations.

There is one other subject that is worth discussion which is posed with a devil's advocate question: with social distancing practices limiting the number of mourners, why bother with a personalized burial vault for a graveside service that barely anyone will attend? The reality is that it is even more important in terms of the emotional support for the few in attendance, who have less people around them who could give them that support, or through their stories talk about the significance that their loved one had. A vault cover that includes images, photos, symbols, and words that reflect the unique person who is being commemorated tells those stories and lends that emotional support. The service might also be livestreamed so that friends and family can view the service and indeed see and appreciate the treasured tribute on the vault. In fact, livestreaming not only "brings virtually" those who would have been in attendance, but even more who might otherwise not have been able to attend.

Social distancing is somewhat of a misnomer – in our present environment it is actually about physical distancing. In fact, it is more important than ever to build and maintain social ties with your communities and the families that you are helping. Effective remote burial vault presentations support physical distancing while achieving the critical social connection necessary for your business. **FBA**

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